

# Researchers are a valuable asset to Kenai National Wildlife Refuge

by Rick Johnston

One of the most rewarding aspects of working at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge is the opportunity to interact with the many scientists, academics, and other researchers that visit the Refuge during the summer field season. Each summer we have seasonal staff, volunteers, and visiting scientists investigating and studying everything from geology and glacial retreat to wildland fire history. Many aspects of the biotic community are under investigation from well known terrestrial wildlife like brown bears to genetically distinct invertebrate populations on the Harding Ice Field, as well as invasive species.

Research at the Kenai involves visiting researchers from a variety of Universities, government agencies, local researchers both on the Refuge staff and other agencies such as the State Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) are also busy on the Refuge. ADF&G for example is prolific in the quest for information to manage fish and wildlife populations. In 2005, they will have almost a dozen different working projects, from fisheries research to Brown Bear population status research. The Refuge, since its earlier days as the Kenai National Moose Range, has always been a popular and rewarding place to conduct research on unanswered resource and wildlife questions of Alaska and global scale as well as questions of local interest. The universities, institutions and individuals that have been involved with the Kenai are an integral part of the fabric, history and management of the Kenai. From well known local research institutions such as the internationally known Moose Research Center targeting individual species, to more global climate research and social science research questions of human behavior and crowding sponsored by national foundations, the Kenai has been a living laboratory for investigators and scientist of all stripes.

Many resource and wildlife management questions related to Alaska were first pondered here on the Kenai Peninsula. The adventures and mis-adventures of these field investigators are both the subject of fact and legend and continue to unfold annually. The first Refuge Manager Dave Spencer honed new moose

counting strategies that are still used today. Spencer also recognized the relationship between land development politics and research when helping to establish the Andrew Simons Research Natural Area which is now the core of Kenai Wilderness.

Spencer's recognition of the Kenai as a place where Alaska resources and expanding settlement would have to co-exist and that resource knowledge was the only way to do so, was recognized by congress in 1980. Indeed, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) uniquely established research and training as one of the Kenai Refuge's five major purposes. To be sure, other federal and non-federal conservation units receive research interest aplenty, but congress singled out the Kenai for special recognition in this regard. Refuge purposes include: "(iv) to provide... opportunities for scientific research, interpretation, environmental studies education, and land management training."

Being a Refuge pilot for twenty years, I probably get to interact with a wider variety of scientists and researchers than the average staff person. In Alaska often times pilots are enlisted to help with a variety of research jobs since "you're here anyway... might as well put you to work". I look forward each year for the opportunity to interact with different experts, you know the type... the ones that were getting straight A's in high school when I was pulling C's. Within the last week, I've had an opportunity to radio track brown bear, count swans, scoop mud samples from lake sediments, ferry researchers to Lake Clark Park Preserve and administratively review several proposals for new research. Generally, I have always held scientist and resource investigators in high regard. Not necessarily for their advanced degrees and vast knowledge on a subject area, but for their patience and tenacity in pursuing a particular area of study and more importantly, for the information they provide to solve problems. Many researchers can be boring to talk to on subjects other than their area of interest, and they hardly ever appreciate good humor and my jokes about lost data. But collectively, they enrich the intellectual and

cultural atmosphere that pervades the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, particularly in the summer. In a single day I may meet staff and visiting scientists from six different states, universities and backgrounds. I enjoy hearing their take on their individual projects, resource issues in general, and their Alaska experience.

Many types of wildlife and land management research involve two to three years of data gathering and then the inevitable write up and peer review. Other research involves methodical data gathering over many years. The information has often proven invaluable in wisely managing Refuge resources. Annual gathering of Trumpeter Swan nesting, brood and rearing success over 30 years has proved to be critical guide to gauge the tolerance of certain wildlife species for development and disturbance both on and off Refuge lands. Researchers and academics themselves are as diverse as the types of studies being pursued. Some will never be personally involved in the final product... with final analysis many years in the future. A body of research related to a geographic area like the Kenai, often provides the foundation for related or continued research continually adding to the information and cumulative body of knowledge. Delayed gratification is usually essential for researchers.

In any case, the Kenai has been on the cutting edge of wildlife and resource information gathering techniques. Retired Biologist Ted Bailey's past use of lower 48 hounds to tree and live capture lynx is one example of innovation that has been used here. Current biologist are using computer technology and field plots to model all types of wildlife population information.

Although classically trained in social scientist research, methodical research was never really a fit for me. I personally prefer a little faster and more antidotal quest for knowledge such as... if you don't see many Swans nesting on lakes surrounded by residential development... then Swans must not like barbecues, barking dogs, motor boats and inquisitive kids with sling shots... or if your waiting in line for 30 minutes to get through Soldotna... it must be July and the highway from Anchorage must be open, the American economy is robust and gas prices are only a foot

note to the pursuit of salmon... If you have to increasingly run for cover from thunder and lightning, or if you must land your airplane to wipe away little green bugs from your windshield you in fact have evidence of "global warming" here on the Kenai.

I've tried, however, to use my antidotal observations and truisms to prove a point or otherwise squelch an opposing view point at an important planning meeting and I can attest that with a few exceptions it doesn't work well. However, referencing a well documented and peer reviewed body of research to prove a point works almost every time to win converts to a line of thinking or equally important, to gain funding for a particular problem.

The Kenai Refuge is currently involved in an updated comprehensive planning project where the course of future management will be set and many problems and issues are being addressed. In such a planning and decision making forum, information and knowledge are everything. During planning discussions there seem to be as many unanswered questions as there are references to existing research. Certainly, future scientific discovery opportunity for those grade schoolers knocking down straight A's and perhaps a pilot job or two for the other guys.

The Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, like any other institution, is made richer and more effective by a wide variety of ideas and knowledge and those who prospect for unanswered questions. Here's to all of those individuals, scientists, universities and others who help gather information, acquire knowledge and share their ideas with us and, for my part, ride in my airplane, let me hand them clipboards, and help the quality time fly by.

*If you would like information about ongoing research projects or if you would like to bring your future scientist to a Refuge visitor program contact Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters at 262-7021 for information. Rick Johnston is a Ranger/Pilot at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. He has worked on Kenai Wildlife Refuge since 1979. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*